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WASHING THE DISCIPLES' FEET: JOHN 13:1-20

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*"Willst du ins Unendliche schreiten,
Geh' nur im endlichen nach allen Seiten."*

This word of Goethe has a twofold application to the student who takes up the study of John 13:1-20; for, first, the critical question, if followed out on "all sides," involves many and difficult points; and, second, the content of the passage, whether it be historical or not, leads us to the deep things of the ministry of Jesus. But the present article will not attempt to say all that can be said either on the critical question or on the profound significance of the scene. We shall seek only to indicate why we see in the passage a historical tradition, in spite of the attractive arguments that have been advanced by various scholars in support of the view that it is a free production by the author of the Fourth Gospel—a sort of dramatization of the thought expressed in Luke 22:27; and also to indicate the relation of its teaching to that of the symbolical bread and wine.

We need not, then, enter into the question whether the writer of this gospel put the washing of the disciples' feet on the thirteenth or the fourteenth of Nisan; it is clear that he put it in the last evening which Jesus spent with his disciples. Since the story is recorded by no other writer, if we accept it as historical we shall naturally think of it as belonging to that evening. But is it reasonable to regard it as the description of an actual occurrence? It is found in a writing which, by very general consent, contains a large interpretative element—a writing which the author introduces with words of a purely speculative character, and of which he says that it was written to prove a proposition (20:31). Moreover, the story makes use of some material which is found in the earlier gospels (e. g., vss. 16, 17, 20), and in one instance attributes to Jesus words which appear to have no close connection with the subject under discussion (vs. 20). In addition to all this, it is true that the entire scene may be regarded as a visible representation of the truth of Jesus' words, "The Son of

man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister" (Mark 10:45); and may with even greater fitness be regarded as a vivid presentation of the thought of Luke 22:27, "I am in the midst of you as he that serveth." Why, then, is not the story to be held as a symbolic interpretation of a teaching of Jesus which the author of the gospel regarded as fundamental? What sufficient reasons are there for reading it as a veritable transcript of things which actually took place?

One reason which I am sure will have weight with every reader is that the Jesus and the Peter of this story act and speak with their own inimitable originality. They are wholly the same persons whom we see in many a synoptic picture. The situations are new, and they are critical for those who participate in the scene; but still the figures of Jesus and his impulsive, though loyal, disciple are so subtly and profoundly true to life that it is far easier to regard the story as history than as fiction. Grant that the author of the Fourth Gospel could have invented the situation, it is very difficult to believe that even he was equal to the production of these character sketches. I find it easier to regard the seventeenth chapter of John as the author's interpretation of the spirit of Jesus than to regard the story of the washing of the disciples' feet as a literary enlargement of Luke 22:27. One may, indeed, find it hard to believe that the Jesus of the early gospels is altogether the Jesus of the "high-priestly" prayer; but the one who arose from supper and girded himself after the manner of a slave, the one who washed the feet of the disciples, who held with Peter the colloquy of John 13:8-10, and who afterward explained the significance of the act which he had performed—this one is felt to be no other than the Jesus of Nazareth and Capernaum, of the Sermon on the Mount and the parables, and of the score of narratives which depict the Master as a healer and a teacher of men.

And the Peter of this story in John is a revelation of Peter's own heart. How like him to break the sacred silence with "Lord, dost thou wash my feet?" And when he declared a moment later, in words that must have startled everyone in the room, even Jesus himself, "Thou shalt never wash my feet!" we must confess that, while the declaration is like Peter, it is extremely improbable that anyone would have had the hardihood to attribute such a shocking statement to Peter, even if one had possessed the cleverness thus to

sketch the fisherman to the life. Hardly less characteristically divine is the sudden and complete revulsion of feeling that finds an outlet in the cry—accompanied, we may well believe, with tears: “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.”

We conclude then that, in view of the marvelous truthfulness of this portrayal of character, it is easier to regard the scene as born of life than as born of the brain of any man.

Another point to be noted, when speaking of the historical character of this Johannine narrative, is the fact that the washing of the disciples' feet took place *during* the supper (see vss. 2, 4, 12, 26). Is that a detail which we can reasonably suppose was invented? If a Jew had devised the scene, would he not have put the act of washing *prior* to the supper? We will suppose that he wished to suggest the forgetfulness of the disciples, their common neglect of an opportunity to show a kind attention to the Master; but is it probable that he would have postponed it until the supper was actually in progress? Certainly this was not necessary for the accomplishment of his purpose, and we must regard it as exceedingly improbable. Indeed, it does not seem likely that Jesus himself, when first he reclined at the table, with the disciples, contemplated the act of washing their feet. It appears much more probable that he was led to it by something that he observed as the supper was being taken—perhaps some ill-feeling caused by the order in which the company was seated, or some other lack of brotherly regard. But if the act of washing the disciples' feet was not premeditated by Jesus (assuming now that it is historical); if it was inspired by some passing incident (which view is surely in keeping with the habit of Jesus; for, though he always acted on principle, he did not have a programme for the details of his course from day to day), then it becomes still more plain that the interruption of the supper for the sake of washing the disciples' feet does not accord with the idea that the narrative is a purely literary product. If the scene had been invented, there is every reason to think that the inventor would have located the washing of the disciples' feet *before* rather than *during* the supper.

But, without dwelling longer on this aspect of the subject, we inquire next into the relation of this symbolic act of washing the disciples' feet to the symbolic partaking of bread and wine which the

Synoptic Gospels put in the last evening of the life of Jesus. The Fourth Gospel, while it implies acquaintance with the institution of the Lord's Supper (see 6:53-58), omits any reference to its establishment. How far does the symbolic act which it does preserve take the place of that which the earlier gospels give us?

To this question one may reply, in the first place, that the washing of the disciples' feet is a parable which teaches the duty of unselfish service as a fundamental Christian law. Obviously it does not contemplate a formal rite patterned after the action of Jesus. It is an *example* (ὑπόδειγμα), applicable over the length and breadth of life, not a model to be copied in detail. Had it been intended as a model, it would have needed no explanation from Jesus; but as a parable on love it might, like many other of his parables, be thought to need explanation. But in the giving of bread and wine later in the same evening, it is difficult to think that Jesus did not contemplate the repetition of the act, a spontaneous ordinance of affectionate remembrance. Here, then, is one point in which the two great symbolic acts part company.

It is equally plain that the washing of the disciples' feet, though a most comprehensive symbol, and one whose significance can never be inwardly digested without thought of Jesus, nevertheless is not so intense in meaning, so original, so personal, so expressive of the vital relation of Christ to the Christian life of his disciples, as is the Eucharist. Its symbolism does not so appeal to the imagination. The conception of the broken body and the shed blood under the symbols of bread and wine is more powerful to stir the soul than is the act of Jesus in washing the feet of his disciples. Both symbols turn the thought to Jesus, but one *rivets* it upon him.

But we have not yet touched the broadest and most practical distinction between the earlier and the later symbolic acts in which Jesus on the last evening of his life impressed on his disciples the significance of his whole career. In one, the Eucharist, the soul faces Christ; in the other it faces the fellow-man. In one the soul contemplates the support and sustenance of its life; in the other it fronts its duty to all other souls. Therefore in the observance of the Lord's Supper the disciple is drawn out to fellowship with the Invisible, with God as revealed in Christ; but in the realization of the lesson

of the other symbolic act he is brought into contact with men and women and children to whom he can minister. Hence it is plain that of the two symbols one is religious, the other ethical; or—since we, unlike Jesus, are apt to separate ethics and religion—we will rather say that one symbol looks Godward, the other manward.

And this brings us finally, to the obvious thought that the two symbolic acts are complementary. It may have been the recognition of this truth which led the author of the Fourth Gospel to incorporate in his narrative the story of the washing of the disciples' feet. Even at the time when he wrote, Christians may have begun to see the necessity of emphasizing the truth of the less attractive of the two symbolic acts. For, plainly, as human nature runs, the lesson of the earlier symbolic act *is* less attractive and easy of performance than that of the later act. Therefore the former has often been neglected, while the latter has come to be the very center of ceremonial Christianity. "Sacrament" and "sacramental" are not New Testament words, but I think that from the standpoint of Jesus the lesson of the bread and wine is no more really sacramental than is that of the washing of the disciples' feet. The great truths which the two symbols express are necessary one to the other.

It has been held in recent times that Jesus in giving bread and wine to his disciples did not contemplate a fixed religious rite. However that may be, one may safely say that there is much in the Protestant observance of the Lord's Supper and in the Roman Catholic mass which was *not* contemplated by Jesus. And this also one may safely say that, from the standpoint of Jesus, no severance of the truths of the two symbolic acts is to be tolerated; that any observance of the Supper without observance of the teaching of the earlier symbol is an abomination in his sight; and that, if either the outward rite of the Lord's Supper or the truth of the symbolic foot-washing is to be magnified at the expense of the other, it certainly should *not* be the outward rite.